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ABSTRACT

In the face of chronic youth unemployment, decision makers in many countries are questioning the role and effectiveness of alternance between school-based vocational training and in-company work experience. This notion applies to three very different realities: training courses offered as an alternative to traditional school-based training for youth with low academic levels; training courses aimed at familiarizing participants with the company and applying knowledge acquired through schooling; and the company as primary site for acquiring competence, with theoretical background provided in the school. One difficulty lies in extending the model to more highly skilled jobs. Companies show an increasing tendency to recruit their labor force with higher training on the external market. One educational concern is whether it is preferable to move to a unified training system or maintain a separate vocational track. For alternating training to function properly, the points of view and motivations of the different actors must be considered. Employers have to see an economic advantage for themselves. The success of alternating training depends on support of regional and local authorities, and the national institutional framework should not block local labor market dynamics. Employees' representatives want to be certain that time spent in the company is in fact used for training. The attraction of more high-quality students raises the problems of parity and the upgrading of industrial and manual occupations. (YLB)

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Apprenticeship, Alternance, Dual System: Dead Ends or Highways to the Future?

In the face of chronic youth unemployment, decision-makers in many countries are currently questioning the role and effectiveness of alternance between school-based vocational training and in-company work experience. Whatever the context, fundamental questions are being raised: what are the effects of alternating training on youth labour-market entry and the improvement of the training-employment relationship? What are the economic, organisational and pedagogical requirements for success in alternating training? What is the role of the social actors in the definition and implementation of alternating training programmes?[1]

HISTORICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

Until recently, only certain European countries maintained or promoted real "systems" of initial vocational training, whether school-based (Scandinavian countries, France) or apprenticeship-based and complemented by in-school training (German-speaking countries).

During the 1960s, countries favouring access to post-compulsory education and the raising of the general level of qualification developped the single middle school, access to post-compulsory general studies (United States) and school-based post-compulsory vocational training (Scandinavian countries, France). The modernisation of the apprenticeship systems in the German-speaking countries initially went unnoticed. Instead, these systems were held to generate inequalities because of the early but definitive orientation of young people towards "watertight" tracks of vocational training and higher education. By the end of the 1970s, the virtues of the dual system in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, notably with regard to labour-market entry, provoked interest in many other countries. Decision-makers and researchers were soon to discover the successful mobilisation of German companies behind apprenticeship in the context of the sharp demographic increase of the 1970s and 1980s. They could appreciate collective efforts towards modernisation of training content and pedagogical organisation and the existence of a system of skilling continuing training within the industry which gave former apprentices access to careers as supervisors, technicians and engineers.

Today, however, certain difficulties seem to be calling into question the exemplary validity of the apprenticeship model. In Germany, today's young people are less attracted by certain apprenticeship tracks, and they are heading towards post-secondary studies, preferably at university, which offer better prospects for individual advancement. In certain sectors, the traditional worker careers are threatened by competition from graduates of the *Fachhochschulen* and universities, while the latter have to confront the competition among advanced diploma-holders. Thus, the spectre that periodically haunts Germany is once again looming on

1. These issues were discussed by decision-makers and experts from twenty-three member countries of the OECD on the occasion of a seminar organised jointly by that organisation and Céreq and held in Marseilles on 12-14 April 1994.

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the horizon: a surplus of higher-education graduates and a scarcity of skilled workers.

During the 1980s, certain European countries inspired by the German experience (Denmark, Holland, France) experimented with school-based initial vocational training programmes that combined periods of academic instruction with in-company learning sequences (with the possibility for such programmes to develop in parallel to traditional apprenticeship). These experiments have proven interesting in more than one respect. First of all, they offered new possibilities for learning in the real working environment in sectors where these had previously been nonexistent or poorly adapted to needs. They also allowed for certain innovations in the way of conceiving the pedagogical balance between theory and practice and for implementing alternance between school and company on the post-secondary level as well. And finally, they attempted to upgrade the status of vocational training, notably through the creation of tracks that simultaneously prepared for employment and further study on the secondary or higher education level. In the English-speaking countries, the educational policies of the last two decades have instead placed the emphasis on the reinforcement of general education, while many young people have continued to enter the labour market without qualification. School-based alternatives to this general education have been developped, however: in the United States, with the community colleges (on the post-secondary level); in Great Britain, with the spread of further education colleges and the creation of the National Vocational Qualifications system; and more recently in Australia, with the TAFE (Technical and Further Education) programmes and the revision of qualifications and collective agreements. In some instances, these reforms were accompanied by the creation of specific programmes favouring youth labour-market entry (e.g., the Youth Training Schemes in Great Britain).

CLARIFYING CONCEPTS AND TERMINOLOGY WITHOUT LOSING SIGHT OF DIVERSITY

The notion of alternance, or alternating training, is variously interpreted from one country to another.[2] It can be applied to at least three very different realities:

- training courses offered as an alternative to traditional school-based training for young people with low academic levels in order to give them a better idea of their abilities and motivations and permit them to learn about the working world;
- training courses aimed at familiarising participants with the company and applying knowledge acquired through vocational schooling;
- the company as primary site for acquiring competence, with theoretical background provided in the school one or two days a week or during a separate period of several weeks or months. In all three cases, contact with the real conditions of working life is an important dimension, which means that the notion of alternating training goes far beyond the simple combination of theory and practice.

The objectives pursued and the publics involved vary from one model to another. Ideally, alternating training aims at avoiding the academic instruction and distancing from the working world that school-based instruction implies, as well as training that is too narrow, too short-sighted and of limited value for in-company training.

The benefits that can be expected from alternating training are multiple:

- for **companies,** training that is more effective because of the combination of theory and practice and better adapted to the realities of the working world, as well as the possibility of selecting the trainees whom they would like to recruit at the end of the programme;

- for **training organisations,** apart from the pedagogical advantages, there is the outreach to industry and the job opportunities available to their students;

- for **young people**, a more concrete training programme, confirmation of their orientation, familiarisation with the working world and transition towards employment;

- for the **labour market**, an improved functioning because of this transition and adjustments obtained directly through links established between school and company, which can mitigate somewhat the uncertainties of forecasting with regard to training needs.

ALTERNATING TRAINING AND THE EMPLOYMENT LINKAGE

For some, the modern economy needs above all a new kind of skilled workers. Their training on the German apprenticeship model presupposes at least three conditions:

- the upgrading of industrial production occupations;
- the creation or reinforcement of occupational labour markets (comparable to those existing for the professions) that validate their qualification, offer prospects of professional development and obtain the consensus of the social partners;

2. In English, even the term *alternance* is not widely used, and its meaning is not always clear in English-speaking countries.

- the existence of pedagogically competent personnel within the company.

According to this view, training skilled workers for industry is the most important task, but also the most difficult.

The fact that the dual system has been successful thus far is notably due to its particular ability to combine basic skills acquired in initial training with those acquired in the course of working life through mobility. The relative difficulty of extending this model to the tertiary activities which now constitute the large majority of jobs remains open to debate, but no real generalisation can be made because of the diversity of these activities (in some of which, such as the health sector, occupational labour markets are already functioning).

Bringing these co[illegible]ons together in contexts other than that of the Ger[illegible]n-speaking countries may prove difficult. In many countries, companies show an increasing tendency to recruit their highly skilled labour force, with higher education training, on the external market. As we have just seen, this trend is beginning to manifest itself even in the German-speaking countries, where continued studies tends to be more attactive and highly regarded.

Recognition of the qualification on the labour market is one prerequisite for the success of alternating training; the problem of certification arises in particular for knowledge that cannot be "objectified" and behaviours specifically concerning socialisation. Today, companies are placing more and more importance on these elements, and it would seem that alternating training is a good way of acquiring them. It is particularly difficult to evaluate them, however. One possible way, which is perhaps not adequate, is peer-group recognition (which already exists, for example, in the medical profession).

THE PEDAGOGY OF ALTERNATING TRAINING AND RELATIONS WITH THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The relationship with general education leads to two broader questions that are frequently raised: the "parity of esteem" and whether it is preferable to move towards a unified training system or, conversely, to maintain a vocational track that is separate from general education. In other words, wouldn't alternating training tend to downgrade the tracks with which it is associated? The responses to these questions vary. Certain countries (e.g. the United States) are seeking greater integration of their system. For others (Germany), the pursuit of integration threatens to accelerate the downgrading of vocational tracks.

In fact, the unfavourable image often associated with apprenticeship results from the occupations that it prepares for, not from this form of organisation per se. For this reason, there is an attempt in France, for example, to improve the image of apprenticeship by making it a means of entering higher technician, engineering and business school training programmes.

On the pedagogical level, the division of roles and the link between school and company deserve special attention. Even in Germany, this link is sometimes felt to be inadequate. But some voices have been raised to warn against the illusion of a perfect integration or even co-ordination between the two universes, which still remain fundamentally different: the fact that the trainees have to make the synthesis themselves is a part of the training process, at least once a certain level has been reached.

THE ROLE OF THE ACTORS IN ALTERNATING TRAINING

In order for alternating training to function properly, the points of view and motivations of the different actors must be adequately taken into account, as can be seen from current debates in France.

- The **companies,** first of all. Employers would be a better term, because there is no reason why alternating training could not develop in the public services as well, but at present this is more rarely the case. Where companies are concerned, they have to see an economic advantage, for themselves in particular or as an employer in general. The economic context cannot be too unfavourable, and if possible, the company should be warned of the risk of losing those employees for whom it has invested in training. Companies which do not clearly accept this logic could be suspected of having other motivations (i.e., wanting to hire low-cost labour on a temporary basis).

In practice, the development of alternating training comes up against the insufficient number of places offered by the companies. This calls for further examination: is it a reflection of economic constraints, conservative attitudes or institutional difficulties? The answer largely depends on the specific situation in each country. In certain cases (such as Germany), the companies are partly compensated for their acceptance of the training effort by the fact that they retain an essential role in the orientation of the system and continue to control the entry flows. In other situations, financial incentives have been proposed, but in this case it is necessary to ensure that they guarantee quality training and do not simply lead to lower labour costs.

- The role of the **public powers**, on the national as well as regional or local levels, is to define an institutional framework, but this is only meaningful if the different actors express explicit needs and expectations in favour of alternating training. In many countries (such as France), there is pressure to keep certification as a national prerogative, while others are beginning to be concerned about the absence of a national system (e.g., the United States), or are in the process of setting one up (Great Britain). This much said, the question which arises is that of knowing how to co-ordinate activities on the national and local levels. A clear definition of the division of jurisdictions is indispensable, but this does not always exist. Calling the institutional framework into question can be a source of conflicts and new balances of power between national, regional and local bodies.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the success of alternating training depends a great deal on the support of regional and local authorities. In any case, the national institutional framework should not block spontaneous market dynamics on the local level. But it should also be recognised that decentralisation can favour social and regional inequalities.

- **Employees' representatives** are sometimes reluctant about alternating training under work contracts because of the remunerations and the precarious employment that it implies. They would also like to be certain that the time spent in the company is in fact used for training (which comes back to the issue of pedagogical organisation and mentors). If not, they have reason to fear that the companies are only looking for the lower labour costs associated with apprenticeship and that this arrangement keeps them from seeking other solutions to improve their competitiveness.

- The profile, attitude and motivation of the **students** in relation to alternating training merits more serious attention. The definition of their initial profile is a subject of debate. In the most competitive industrialised countries (Germany, Japan), candidates for skilled worker training used to constitute a kind of elite; today, however, they are more likely to be the "rejects" of the academic system. The widespread hope hope that apprenticeship will, on the contrary, attract more and more high-quality participants raises the problems already noted of parity of esteem and the upgrading of industrial and manual occupations.

However, it must also be noted that young people's reservations about manual labour and industrial production jobs, and thus about the training that prepares for them, are not simply the result of a prejudice. Their choices of orientation are dictated in part by objective considerations (remunerations and working conditions of the different occupations), but perhaps even more by a preoccupation with status and social recognition, and their qualification is not always recognised.

One question often raised today is whether alternating training should be adapted to the lowest qualifications and the most disadvantaged populations. A positive answer is possible as long as the goal is not directly vocational training but the confrontation with a reality likely to help with the orientation of young people and contribute to their personal development.

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